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In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber assigns the following task to his readers:

Consider, for example, the conclusion of the *Divine Comedy*, where the poet in Paradise is struck dumb as, all desires fulfilled, he contemplates the divine mysteries. Then compare this with the conclusion of the poem that has become known as the ‘*Divine Comedy of Puritanism*.’ (33)

This comparison, writes Weber, reveals an “ethical peculiarity” (33) which lies at the heart of the capitalist

spirit: the uniquely Protestant conception of the calling. In this paper, I aim to expand on Weber's reference to *Paradise Lost* through an analysis of the poet's biography. I argue that Weber's "spirit" of capitalism is located in Milton's lifelong "obsess[ion] with realizing his own vocation" (DiSalvo 262). For clarity of presentation, I divide my argument into two parts. First, I briefly examine Weber's conception of the capitalist spirit. Second, using Weber's ideas, I investigate the development of Milton's literary vocation through a reading of *Paradise Regained*.

I begin with the central component of Weber's spirit of capitalism: the calling or the *beruf*. "We shall...use the expression 'spirit of capitalism' for that attitude which, *in the pursuit of a calling*, strives systematically for profit for its own sake..." [emphasis in the original] (Weber 19). Accepting as true Weber's assertion that the development of this spirit was contingent on "a long, slow process of education" (17) and not the necessary result of a historical dialecticism, I read Weber's essay as an investigation into the historical and philosophical origins of the *beruf*.

Whereas Catholics held that specific individuals were called by God to serve in the clergy, Protestants (who characteristically distrusted ecclesiastical authority) believed that God called all human beings to serve. The idea was that every individual was assigned a "task set by God" (Weber 28) and was liable for its performance. As translated in the Geneva Bible, 1 Corinthians 7:20 reads: "Let every man abide in the same vocation wherein he was called."¹

The concept of vocation was expanded by John Calvin to include the “service of the secular life of the community” (Weber 75). Pragmatically, the result of this expansion was that every moment of the Calvinist’s life—including those when she or he was laboring in a secular vocation—became an opportunity to serve God. Accordingly, “wasting time” became “the first and most serious of all sins” (Weber 106). When combined with the Protestant doctrine of predestination, this ethic led to the “‘sanctification by works’ raised to the level of a system” (Weber 80). In contrast to the Catholic God, who required devotion only at mass and various other set times, service to Calvin’s God required active, tireless, and systematic labor in a *beruf*.

The extent of the Calvinist’s success (or failure) in a secular *beruf* served the glory of God and indicated her or his *status gratiae*. Worldly achievements were a matter of practical—and, more importantly, moral—significance. As Weber notes, “there has perhaps never been a more intensive form of religious appraisal of moral *action* than that which Calvinism engendered in its followers” [emphasis in original] (80). Calvinism was the vital historical and philosophical link between Protestantism and what Weber calls the “spirit” of capitalism. Not only did it integrate a believer’s entire life, including her or his vocational labor, into a systemic ideology, but it also morally sanctioned resolute and dedicated labor in a secular *beruf*. This systemization and moralization of secular labor is what Weber finds in the eighteenth-century writings of Benjamin

Franklin and subsequently labels the rationalization of the Protestant ethic.

In the second part of my paper, I wish to show that I find this rationalized ethic—the historical and ideological root of modern capitalism, according to Weber—in Milton himself, whatever his personal religious beliefs were.² My starting point is John Rogers' comment that "the problem of what a calling actually is and how one actually knows one has a calling is a problem that pulsates somewhere beneath most of the lines of poetry that Milton writes" ("Credible Employment"). With this in mind, I read *Paradise Regained* as an autobiographical work to show that Milton, like the Son, was engaged in a lifelong quest to fulfill his *beruf*.

The theme of *Paradise Lost* anticipates the theme of *Paradise Regained*: if "man's first disobedience" (*PL*, I.1)³ was responsible for the loss of paradise, then only "man's firm obedience" (*PR*, I.4) can regain it. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton translates the virtue of obedience into a 'mini-epic' by altering the story of the temptation from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Milton's adaptation, the occasion which initiates the plot is not the mysterious Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness, as it is in the New Testament, but God's act of *calling*. In the poem's first elocation, Satan notes God's calling at the Son's baptism, which lays the framework for the epic's further development: "Who this is we must learn" (I.91). In Aristotelian terms, God's calling is the occasion which does not follow from anything else (God is *causa sui*) and from which a

subsequent event naturally occurs (the Son is led into the wilderness by the Spirit).

But it seems to be important for Milton to show that the Son knew that he was called *before* the moment when he was literally called by God at the Jordan. Hence, the Son reveals in his opening speech that at an early age he believed that he was “born to promote all truth”: “When I was yet a child.../...all my mind was set/Serious to learn and know” (PR I.201-205). Milton also modifies the familiar story of Luke 2:46-50 by adding that Jesus went to the temple not only to learn but also to instruct the teachers there (PR I.212-213). Moreover, Mary has a reasonable explanation for telling her son the story of his nativity: she “perceived” his “growing thoughts” (PR I.227). From these passages, it is clear that the Son knew that he was called to serve God, even though he did not know his particular vocation.

After hearing the story of his birth, the Son rereads the books of the Old Testament and concludes: “[O]f whom they spake / I am” (I.262-263). In other words, the Son learns that he is called to be the Messiah. The pronouncement by God at the Son’s baptism confirms this discovery:

But as I rose out of the laving stream,
Heaven open’d her eternal doors, from
whence
The Spirit descended on me like a Dove,
And last the sum of all, my Father’s voice,
Audibly heard from Heav’n, pronounc’d me
his,
Me his beloved Son, in whom alone

He was well pleas'd; by which I knew the
time
Now full, that I no more should live obscure,
But openly begin, as best becomes
The Authority which I deriv'd from Heaven.
(I.280-289)

The voice of the Father “sums” the childhood experiences of the Son and confirms the Son’s calculation. At this the Son feels “the time / Now full” to “openly begin” his work. Though he already knew that he was called to serve God and even knew that he was called to become the Messiah, it was not yet time to clock-in and begin working until this particular moment.

The question of *how* the Son discovered his calling remains to be answered and brings me back to the “problem” that Rogers identifies as characteristically Milton’s. Again, I refer to the Son’s opening speech. Led into the desert by the Spirit, the Son begins:

O what a multitude of thoughts at once
Awakn’d in me swarm, while I consider
What from within I feel my self, and hear
What from without comes often to my ears
(PR I.196-199)

I read these lines as a description of the Son’s epistemology. There seems to be the following incongruity in the Son’s statement: if the Son’s thoughts are “awakn’d,” then it stands to reason that there is an awakener that is some entity other than the Son himself that is present, some external force. Yet, the Son is in a place of “solitude...far from track of men”

(PR I.191). Without a doubt, the Son is describing a process of introspection during which he experiences an *internal* awakening. The awakener is the Spirit which led him into the desert, which is *inside of* the Son. Thus, he considers “what from within” before he hears “what from without.” In this particular instance, the Son acquires the practical knowledge of how to become the Messiah. By the same process of internal awakening, the Son was able to learn of his calling by God at an early age. The Son’s approach to the acquisition of knowledge is rationalistic: he learns things *a priori* when his consciousness is awakened by a “multitude of thoughts.”

As I mentioned above, I read *Paradise Regained* as the autobiographical narrative of an individual on a quest for self-identification. Milton translated certain aspects of the development of his own career into the story of the Son. The Son’s dilemma—discovering, understanding, and fulfilling his *beruf*—is identical with the unifying concern of Milton’s life. As Dayton Haskin notes in *Milton’s Burden of Interpretation*, the poet struggled to find his “place” in the scriptures (*à la* Saint Paul and Augustine) and ultimately settled on Matthew’s Parable of the Talents. Similarly, the Son of *Paradise Regained* struggles to find his place in the Hebrew Bible and ultimately finds it in the pronouncement of Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3:14: *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (“I am that I am”). Consequently, when the Son reads the books of the Old Testament, he discovers: “[O]f whom they spake / I am” (PR I.262-263). Later, during his debate with Satan, he again invokes Yahweh’s exhortation: “I seek not mine, but

his / who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am” (PR III.106-107). Both Milton and the Son face an interpretative burden with Biblical texts, each struggling to find his respective “place.” We should not be surprised to find Milton projecting his own anxieties onto the Son of God. He had, after all, already labeled himself prophetic in “Lycidas” and compared himself to Isaiah in *The Reason of Church Government*. Furthermore, as John Rogers rightly remarks in his lecture on *Samson Agonistes*, “there is an unparalleled self-absorption at the heart of Milton’s writing.”

Like the Son, Milton seems to have known at an early age that he was called to serve God. In *Anno Aetatis 19*, Milton wished for his mind to accomplish the following task:

soare
Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav’ns
dore
Look in, and see each blissful Deitie
How he before the thunderous throne doth
lie. (32-36)

It is the English language that will help Milton “soare” above the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe and “look in” the door of Heaven. Presumably, these are the same “eternal doors” that open at the Son’s baptism in *Paradise Regained* (I.281). The “soaring spirit” of ambition is again invoked at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* (I.14) and encouraged by Mary in *Paradise Regained* (I.230). It also appears in the introduction to Book 2 of the *Reason of Church Government*, where Milton describes his ambition to be “an interpreter

and relater of the best and sagest things among [his] own citizens” (840).

Like the Son, Milton discovers his calling through an introspective, rationalistic process. Also in the introduction to Book 2 of *The Reason of Church Government*, the poet writes:

I began this farre to assent both to them and
divers of my friends here at home, and not
lesse to an *inward prompting* which now
grew daily upon me, that by labour and
intent study (which I take to be my portion
in this life) joyn’d with the strong propensity
of nature, I might perhaps leave something
so written to aftertimes, as they should not
willingly let it die. These thoughts at once
possest me...[emphasis added]. (840)

If I take Milton to be using his words in their Latinate sense, then I find him here using “propensity” (from *propendere*, meaning “to lean or hang forward, to incline”) to denote “a leaning or inclination.” Milton’s “strong propensity of nature,” therefore, is his *natural leaning or inclination*, by which he means his “one talent which is death to hide”: his poetic talent (Sonnet 19, 3). Milton’s “inward prompting,” which is the same experience as the Son’s internal awakening, calls him to combine his God-given poetic talent with labor and intent study, to become a great poet and “leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die.”

Here Andrew Milner’s characterization of Milton

as rationalistic is correct in so far as Milton seems to have believed that he learned of his calling *a priori*, i.e. “inwardly,” or prior to and independent of sensory experience. Christopher Hill also agrees when he labels Milton a rationalist in regards to Biblical interpretation. To be unambiguous, I am using the concept ‘rationalism’ in an epistemological sense, whereas Milner and Hill primarily use it to describe a historical and philosophical movement based on “the discrete individual...who decides what is true and what is untrue” (Milner 53). The two uses are obviously correlated but not exactly in agreement.

It is clear then that Milton experienced an internal, *irrational* awakening which called him to serve God through secular labor in a poetic *beruf*. Milton *rationalized* (in the Weberian sense) this unexplainable phenomenon by systematizing and moralizing it. Consequently, in the Miltonic worldview, God is a “Taskmaster” (Sonnet 7) and the poet’s task is an “*opus divinum*” (*Ad Patrem*, 17). In order to write an epic greater than those of antiquity, Milton had to intently study the sum of all thought and knowledge that preceded him and then add some novel thought of his own. While waiting for his “inward ripeness” (Sonnet 7), he had to remain patient, temperate, and obedient—all three of which were virtues of the Son. Indeed, Milton constantly wrote of his fear that he was wasting time (Sonnet 7, Sonnet 19, “On Time,” “Lycidas”). Furthermore, an overtly self-conscious sense of Bloomian belatedness can be found in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, where the poet remarks that the “Subject for Heroic song / Pleas’d me long choosing, and

beginning late” (IX.25-26).

At an early age, Milton was “possessed” by what he knew to be his “portion” in life: his calling to serve God through his secular labor as a poet. By examining the Miltonic canon through the lens of Weber’s ideas, I have found an integrated body of literature which is engaged in a search for “the time / Now full” (*PR*, I.286-287). I conclude that Weber’s “ethical peculiarity” (33) is precisely that idiosyncrasy which is located in the ethic of Milton. The ideas which Weber developed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are supported not only by the conclusion of the “Divine Comedy of Puritanism” but also by the entire life narrative of the poet. This life narrative is told vicariously through the Son in *Paradise Regained* and pervades the poetry and prose of John Milton.

Notes

¹ See Guillory for the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the terms “calling” and “vocation” (from the Latin *vocare*, or “to call”). I wish to ignore this theological discussion for the purposes of my paper since it is relatively clear what Weber and Milton held to be the meaning of these terms.

² See the section entitled “Milton’s Christian Doctrine” in Hill (233-334) for a discussion of Milton’s religious beliefs. I want to emphasize here that Milton need not be a Calvinist in order to exhibit the “Protestant Ethic.” Hill notes that “[Milton’s] conscience found the Protestant ethic in the Bible” (248).

³ All quotations from Milton’s works come from the Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon edition.

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